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REPORT OF THE SUB-COMMISSION ON PREVENTION OF DISCRIMINATION
AND PROTECTION OF MINORITIES ON ITS FORTY-EIGHTH SESSION

Written statement submitted by the Anglican Consultative Council,
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1296 (XLIV).

[7 April 1997]

Contemporary forms of slavery

1. The Anglican Communion Office at the United Nations has been informed of conditions of forced servitude which continue to exist in areas in Mauritania and in border areas along the country's periphery. Although formally abolished in 1980, the persistence of slavery and other conditions of forced servitude continue to deny the human rights of thousands of people, including families and children.

2. The exacerbation of tensions between the Governments of Senegal and Mauritania in the late 1980s contributed to the outbreak of violent conflict between certain segments of the black African and Arab populations. It has come to our attention that discrimination against black Africans in Mauritania has become especially intense, such that equal employment opportunities, access to public services and other public goods have been denied them.

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3. While it may be the express public and legal position of the Government of Mauritania that conditions of servitude should not exist, the conditions of life for thousands of rural farm workers and their families along the border areas of the country suggest otherwise. Part of the problem which exists results from the fact that many of those who have been subjugated lack either the resources or access to judicial protection which may be necessary for them to live as free human beings in their own right.

4. It is also critical to note that conditions of servitude also exist in a number of other places around the world. In some cases it occurs because Governments tolerate such practices; hence, their silence may be interpreted by some as tacit consent. In a review of the problem of slavery and conditions of forced servitude, the Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities formed the Working Group on Contemporary Forms of Slavery. The scourge of slavery, however, continues to persist because many member Governments of the Commission have still been unsuccessful in drafting a strong convention on contemporary forms of slavery.

5. In this context, the Anglican Communion Office is specifically requesting the Commission to develop a realistic and manageable time-table to adopt a formal, legally enforceable international covenant on the issue of slavery and conditions of forced servitude. This covenant is especially significant in the context of the deliberations on the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

6. One of the key problems which the Commission has yet to address involves the coordination of various United Nations organizations and intergovernmental assemblies which have previously deliberated on matters such as these. The issue of slavery and forced servitude is intrinsic to the rights of children, women, minorities, economic, civil and political freedoms, the question of foreign investment, and the illegal traffic of individuals for various ignoble ends. The task at hand, therefore, is to draft a broad covenant which affirms the dignity of every person in its fullest forms.

7. The Anglican Communion Office urges the Commission to treat this matter with the greatest sense of urgency because it involves the fundamental principle of an individual's right to live in peace, which we often take for granted. While a number of laudable statements and pronouncements can be made in the defence of human freedoms, only those which a Government will faithfully endorse and actively enforce can have real impact in changing the political culture of any given society. We sincerely hope that the courage and the resolve to pursue such a task is present and will be evident in the deliberations on this issue by this Commission.
